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MICHAELMAS

by

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The Holy Angels

BELIEF in the existence of an angelic creation is implied both in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, and in particular in the Gospel records. The Angels are represented as being pure spirits, that is they are spirits without bodies; they are in consequence immortal. They are spoken of as being in the presence of God in heaven, as worshipping him, as rendering him willing service, and as acting as the protectors of men and the messengers of God in his dealings with men. It is to be noticed that the word " angel " itself means " messenger ", and is applied to these spirits because of this latter office, to which the Bible bears such frequent witness. The Bible also teaches us that there are evil spirits, created sinless by God, but fallen through their own wilfulness and cast out of heaven.

It is not unreasonable to suppose that God's creation, which includes beings at different levels of existence, should include beings higher in nature than man himself, spiritual as man is, but unlike man in not having a bodily nature. In the hierarchy of creatures, there would obviously be a place for beings higher than man, to which he is akin by his spiritual nature, as there are beings lower in the scale of creation to which he is akin through his bodily condition. That this is in fact so is what the Biblical revelation makes known to us; there are references to the existence of the Angels, and to their service of God, throughout the pages of Holy Writ. For example, in the Gospels

themselves there are references to the ministry of the Angels at all the chief turning points in the life of our Lord: at the Annunciation (St. Luke i. 26); the Birth of Christ (St. Luke ii. 9); the beginning of the Ministry (*e.g.* St. Mark i. 13); the beginning of the Passion (St. Luke xxii. 43); and at the Resurrection (*e.g.* St. Matt. xxviii. 2). In the Acts of the Apostles the same thing is true of the account of our Lord's Ascension (Acts i. 10). The indications of their nature and activity are indirectly given, in that the primary purpose of the narratives is to relate the life of our Lord, but they are none the less significant. The references to the Angels are closely interwoven in the texture of the Gospel records. In his own teaching (*e.g.* in St. Matt. xviii. 10) our Lord has occasion to speak of the existence of the Angels.

The extent of our knowledge of these noble spirits is necessarily limited, but from the various references to them in the Holy Scriptures nine choirs or ranks of Angels have been distinguished by Christian tradition: cherubim; seraphim; thrones; dominations; virtues; powers; principalities; archangels and angels. The distinctions between the different orders implied in these words is not very clearly drawn.

Both in the canonical Scriptures, and also in many apocryphal books, there are references to certain of the Angels by name, the chief of these being St. Michael, after whom the feast on September 29th is specially named. In the New Testament he is referred to in the Epistle of St. Jude (verse 9), and at greater length in the Revelation of St. John. His name signifies "Who is like God?" He is regarded as the chief of the holy Angels, their Leader and Captain; and he is represented in the book of Daniel as the special protector of Israel, "the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people" (Daniel xii. 1). In St. Luke's Gospel the name of the Archangel Gabriel is given as that of the messenger who brought to Mary the tidings of our salvation.

The Feast of Michaelmas

The earliest feasts of God's servants are those of the martyrs, whose " birthdays " (the days of their death to the life of earth, and birth to that of heaven) gave obvious dates for special commemoration. Gradually the custom arose of keeping feasts of Saints other than martyrs, again frequently on the anniversaries of their deaths. The date of the feast of St. Michael and All Angels (or Michaelmas, *i.e.* the day of the Mass of St. Michael) obviously could not be chosen in this way; it is probably the day of the consecration of a Church in honour of St. Michael and All Angels on the Salarian Way, about six miles north of Rome, in the sixth century. When once the idea had been accepted of naming churches after God's servants, without necessarily using the name of a local martyr or Saint, it was natural that many churches in east and west should be dedicated under this title. After this it was inevitable that a commemoration so appealing to Christian devotion should spread to other churches, until Michaelmas became one of the most popular feasts of the year. In providing a special opportunity for devotion to the holy Angels, and for consideration of their nature and office, it supplies a real need in the round of the Church's year.

The Services of Michaelmas

The Mass of St. Michael (which gives us the popular English name for the feast) can teach us many important lessons concerning the true other-worldliness, the appreciation of the reality of the heavenly things, that we greatly need. The opening chant, or *Introit*, most appropriately sounds the characteristic note of the feast. It is taken from the 103rd Psalm: " O praise the Lord, ye Angels of his: ye that excel in strength, ye that fulfil his commandments, and hearken unto the voice of his words." The very first thoughts put before us are therefore those of the glory that the

Angels give to their Maker; of their eminence in strength and dignity; and of their complete and willing obedience to God. These are themes that recur through the feast.

In the *Collect*, which is a prayer concerning the whole company of Angels, rather than a special one of St. Michael, we pray to the eternal God, who has ordained the services both of Angels and men in a wonderful order. (One of the things that we learn from this feast is the rich orderliness of God's creation, which includes beings higher than ourselves as well as lower ones, and all for the service of God himself.) Then we pray that as God's Angels always do him service in heaven, so we ourselves on earth may be succoured and defended by them.

The *Lesson*, in place of an Epistle, is from the Revelation of St. John, and contains the account of the author's vision when he saw the spiritual conflict, the " war in heaven " between St. Michael and the holy Angels, and " the dragon and his angels ". We are here in the most mysterious regions, where we only have glimpses of truths and events that are largely outside our ken; we become aware that we have spiritual allies, and also spiritual foes, for " we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers ". The author of the Revelation is indeed at pains to warn us that the devil is come down to us, so that our own conflict against evil is still being waged.

After this in the *Gradual* we return to our first theme, and again call upon the holy Angels to praise God; then, realizing that we can only call on them if we ourselves are associated with their work of praise, we return again to the first words of the Psalm, " Praise the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, praise his holy name." Then, in the *Alleluia-verse* we ask for the defence of St. Michael: " Holy Michael Archangel, defend us in the battle," that he may, as the collect said, by God's appointment succour and defend us on earth.

The words of the *Gospel* (from St. Matt. xviii. 1 f.) remind us again of true spiritual values of God's kingdom. They tell us how our Lord set a child in the midst of his disciples, and taught them to humble themselves as little children, and to dread putting offences in the way of those little ones. The last verse brings this theme into direct connexion with the rest of the Mass, as it quotes the saying of Christ: "In heaven their Angels do always behold the face of my Father, which is in heaven."

The *Offertory-sentence* comes appropriately at the point where we offer to God, together with the oblations of bread and wine, the incense which reminds us of the worship of heaven itself. It is from the 8th chapter of the Revelation: "An Angel stood by the altar of the temple, having a golden censer in his hand, and there was given unto him much incense, and the smoke of the incense ascended up before God."

There is a special significance on this day also in the words of the *Preface* and *Sanctus*; daily we remember at the altar that it is "with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven" that we praise God, as we proceed now to do in the words of the song of the Angels in the visions both of Isaiah in the Old Testament (Isaiah vi. 1–8) and of the Revelation in the New (Revelation iv. 8).

In the *Communion-verse*, quoting the words of the *Benedicite*, we call once more on the Angels to bless the Lord, and praise him and magnify him above all for ever.

There are several fine hymns that have been written for Michaelmas: "Christ the fair glory of the holy Angels" (English Hymnal 242), and "Thee, O Christ, the Father's splendour" (English Hymnal 241) are from the Latin; "Stars of the morning, so gloriously bright" is from the Greek. The latter two hymns are translated by John Mason Neale, who himself wrote the well-known Michaelmas hymn "Around the throne of God a band" (English Hymnal 243); while

Athelstan Riley, who translated the first hymn mentioned, also wrote " Ye watchers and ye holy ones " (English Hymnal 519), the first verse of which is addressed to the choirs of Angels.

Devotion to the Holy Angels

The frequency of references to the holy Angels in the pages of the Bible is an indication to us of the place they ought to occupy in Christian thought. When we realize that the spiritual combat against evil in which we are engaged is not only the combat of mankind, but part of a great cosmic warfare against evil in which the Angels have already won their victory, we shall the more readily turn to them for their help and prayers. As the Prayer Book collect says they " succour and defend us on earth ". As therefore we ask for the prayers of the Saints in glory, who " are as the Angels ", we shall ask also for the prayers and protection of the Angels themselves. This will not be something for Michaelmas alone, but part of the ordinary life of Catholic devotion. It is a sound instinct that has led the Church to remind us daily at Mass of our approach to God " with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven ". It is also a reminder to us of the assistance that we should seek daily from those angelic allies we have in our spiritual warfare. Especially, since we are taught that each of us is under the protection of a Guardian Angel, we should ask for his prayers.

A Prayer to St. Michael

Holy Michael Archangel, defend us in the day of battle. Be our safeguard against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray, and do thou, Prince of the heavenly host, by the power of God thrust down to hell Satan and all wicked spirits, who wander through the world for the ruin of souls.